OFFICE OF STRATEGIC BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
MANAGEMENT PLANNING AND STRATEGY DIVISION

USER'S GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Notes

WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. Focus groups are usually conducted by a skilled facilitator and comprised of between six to twelve people for a length of about two hours. The discussion is intended to be comfortable and enjoyable for participants to share their ideas and opinions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments presented by others in the discussion.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A FOCUS GROUP?

Focus groups are designed to guide organizations during the development of strategic plans, vision statements, mission statements, or other specific programs, products or services. Additionally, they serve as a means to evaluate or improve existing programs, products, services and plans by gathering qualitative data and incorporating community feedback.

WHEN TO USE A FOCUS GROUP

- To collect the opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of a wide range of constituents about issues relating to a specific topic
- To uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior, or motivation
- To help design or follow up on results of large scale quantitative studies
- To identify strengths and weaknesses of services
- To build on ideas from the participants' comments to solve the problems identified
- To understand differences in perspectives between groups
- To pilot test ideas, materials, plans, policies, products or services

For example, Miami-Dade County is conducting focus groups to enhance the development of the enabling strategies survey of internal services departments as well as inform analysis of the information obtained. Focus groups will include department directors, knowledge workers, and end-user customers. Focus groups can also be utilized to spearhead improvements or cater certain programs to clientele.

Notes

WHEN NOT TO USE A FOCUS GROUP

- You need statistical analysis (focus group analysis is not statistical)
- Your environment is emotionally charged
- You want to educate people or bring them to consensus
- You are asking for sensitive information
- Other methodologies provide better quality information or the same quality information more economically
- You need information that cannot be reliably collected using self-reported data or verbal comments

COST OF A FOCUS GROUP

Costs associated with the implementation of a focus group vary widely with the number of participants, use of a professional facilitator or outsourcing of the function to a private consulting firm. The average cost of a professionally facilitated focus group has been cited between $3,000 to $5,000. These cost estimates include room rental, cash incentives for the participants, professional recruitment costs and moderation. Since multiple sessions are recommended, the costs may be significant. There are numerous ways to control the cost of utilizing focus groups. Certain aspects of a focus group can be developed through in-house resources such as the script development, list of questions, and facility. Additionally, utilizing in-house staff to recruit focus group participants will further decrease the estimated costs.

COUNTY SUPPORT

The Office of Strategic Business Management can provide support to County departments in the development of focus groups as well as possibly serve as a facilitator for focus groups. Additionally, County departments may also choose to access a pool of survey consultants that can provide, for a fee, professional facilitators and guidance during focus group efforts such as script development and results analysis. OSBM can be contacted for further information at 305-375-5143.

HOW TO PLAN A FOCUS GROUP

STEP 1 – CREATE A PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose statement answers questions such as:
- What do we want to achieve by gathering data using a focus group?
- What would you like to know after we are done?
- What kind of decisions do you want to make?
- What kind of information would be helpful to you?

The statement should be clear and specific to avoid difficulty in developing questions and identifying participants. A clear focus statement will make it easier to design the rest of the focus group.

Notes

EXAMPLE PURPOSE STATEMENT

To find out from community residents their perceptions and ideas about adult recreational programs

To hear how our residents perceive and describe code enforcement efforts and to use that information to help revise the mission statement

STEP 2 – ESTABLISH A TIMELINE

Allow *at least* four weeks to plan a focus group. Six to eight weeks is probably more realistic since it will take time to organize all components. Below is a suggested timeline to follow:

Timeline Components	Time Frame
1. Compose a purpose statement	6-8 weeks prior to session
2. Identify participant groups	6-8 weeks prior
3. Gather contact information of participants	6-8 weeks prior
4. Select a facilitator	4-5 weeks prior
5. Develop the questions	4-5 weeks prior
6. Develop a script	4-5 weeks prior
7. Arrange and reserve the session site	4 weeks prior
8. Invite participants by phone	3-4 weeks prior
9. Follow up invitations with letter	2 weeks prior
10. Make room arrangements (seating equipment, refreshments, etc.)	1 week prior
11. Place reminder calls to participants	2 days prior
12. Gather and revise session materials	2 days prior
13. Conduct focus group	
14. Send thank-you letters to participants	2 days post session
15. Transcribe notes from session	2 days post
16. Summarize the session and mail summary to participants	1 week post
17. Analyze session and write report	When all information is gathered

Notes

STEP 3 – IDENTIFY AND INVITE PARTICIPANTS

1. Decide how many participants are needed

The number of focus groups held is shaped by the resources available (staff, time, and money) and the purpose of the research. Resource issues aside, participants should be identified by answering the following questions:

- Who are my targeted audiences?
- What are their characteristics?
- Who has the greatest amount of insight on this topic?

At this stage, you are not creating a list of names, but rather figuring out the types of people that can give you the information you want. The attributes of the participants should be pulled from key words in the purpose statement. Here are some attributes that are typically considered when brainstorming possible participants:

- Age
- Area of expertise (child care, public health, entertainment)
- Employment status
- Family size
- Gender
- Geographical location (neighborhood, proximity to service, work site)
- Income
- Past experience with product or service
- Race or ethnicity
- Relationship to the department (donor, client, volunteer, employee)
- Sector of affiliation (business, nonprofit, foundation, government)
- Tenure
- Disability

If many different constituent audiences need to be questioned, more focus groups need to be conducted to accommodate the differences between the participants. It is recommended that three groups with any one type of audience be conducted.

> TIP:
> It is recommended that three focus groups be conducted per type of audience.

The number of focus groups should be shaped by the ultimate purpose. If the goal is to determine what different populations (i.e. ethnicities, sexes, religions, etc.) want or need then three focus groups per population should be conducted. If, however, the goal is to discover what the populations collectively want or need then three mixed focus groups could be conducted. For instance, if the populations were men and women then either three focus groups including both male and female participants should be held or six focus groups, three with only women and three with only men, should be warranted.

Notes

Finally, avoid mixing individuals in focus groups that have different levels of experience or power. You want to create an environment where all participants feel comfortable saying what they think or feel. For example, it would be imprudent to mix supervisors and their employees in the same focus group.

EXAMPLE OF IDENTIFYING PARTICIPANT GROUPS

<u>Focus Groups Focus Statement</u>:
To find out from community residents their perceptions and ideas about adult recreational programs

<u>Possible Focus Group Participants:</u>
- Residents with a five-mile radius of a park and recreational facility
- Past participants of an adult recreational program

2. **Identify the number of participants to invite**

Each focus group should consist of six to twelve people; however additional people need to be invited to anticipate declined offers. Response rates usually vary between 50% and 66%; therefore nine to twenty-four people should be invited per focus group. Below is a formula that will help determine how many people to invite:

$$\frac{(\textit{Number of focus groups}) \times (\textit{number of participants per group})}{(\textit{Anticipated response rate})}$$

For example, if three focus groups with eight participants each are needed, and if we assume only 50% of invitees will wish to attend, then the total number of invitees needed is:

$$\frac{3\ (\textit{number of focus groups}) \times 8\ (\textit{number of participants per group})}{.5\ (\textit{anticipated response rate})} = 48$$

After determining the number and type of individuals necessary for the participants, a list of possible participants can be made. The list should include both the name and the category of the individuals.

3. **Refine the list of participants.**

There are a number of strategies to identify participants for focus groups. They include the following:
- Find an existing list of people that fit the attributes you seek
- Piggyback focus groups with another event of individuals that fit the attributes you seek
- Conduct a focus group at a location where individuals that fit the attributes you seek congregate
- Ask neutral parties for names

Notes

- Utilize a screening/selection service (can be expensive)
- Random Telephone Screening (efficient if attributes are general and common)
- Advertise in newspapers and bulletin boards

Make sure the list includes names, correct salutations, addresses, and phone numbers.

4. Choose a random sample of invitees from your list, finalize the list and invite participants.

Assume you have a list of 200 possible participants, but you only need to invite 48 of them. How do you choose a random sample of 48 names? Use a list of random numbers! The website below can create a random list of numbers that you can use to pick potential invitees:

http://www.graphpad.com/quickcalcs/randomN1.cfm

Call the individuals on the list in the random order provided by the website. A sample script for inviting individuals is provided in Attachment A.

5. Getting participants to attend focus groups

It isn't a given that people will attend your focus group. To help ensure that you obtain information from the population groups of interest, we suggest the following tips:

Describe who is sponsoring the event, and why it is important.

You are asking people to commit time and energy to a topic that may seem insignificant to them. Make sure they understand that their input is vital for service or product improvement.

Ensure confidentiality of information and ease of attending.

Choose a location that is easy for them to attend, provide refreshments, reiterate as many times as necessary that their comments are confidential and that their names will not be attached to any report. These steps help make the participant feel comfortable in expressing their opinion on the topic of interest.

Personalize invitations.

This added touch of effort helps in securing the appropriate number of participants.

Offer Incentives.

Private companies often offer incentives to include cash stipends to focus group participants. Although this is less prevalent in the public sector, a simple token of appreciation may help bring people who may otherwise stay home. Refreshments, key chains, t-shirts, discount passes to County facilities (Seaquarium, Metro Zoo), etc. all qualify as potential incentives.

Notes

STEP 4 – GENERATE THE QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED

The particular questions posed in a focus group are critical. There are generally three types of questions: 1) introductory questions, 2) key questions, and 3) ending questions. Good focus group questions have the following characteristics:

- Sound conversational
- Use words the participants would use when talking about the issue
- Easy to say
- Clear and short
- Usually open-ended
- Usually one-dimensional
- Include clear, well-thought out directions

The sequence and tone of the questions are as significant as the context itself.
A good sequence of questions:

- Has an easy beginning
- Is sequenced
- Moves from general to specific
- Uses the time wisely

Following are some examples of ineffective and effective questions as well as a helpful process for designing questions:

Ineffective Questions	Effective Questions
Do you like the work we do? (This question is closed-ended and elicits a "yes/no" response.)	What do you consider to be our strengths? (This is open-ended; it encourages people to think and respond at length.)
What do you like best about the proposed strategic plan? (This is too general; it should focus more on a specific point.)	What do you like best about how the strategic plan is being communicated? (This is a specific, focused question.)
Why do you refuse our services? (This question is too abrupt. It may make some participants feel defensive or uncomfortable giving criticism. Participants need to be eased into discussing negative issues.)	1. What are some of our strengths? 2. In what areas could we improve? 3. What about our services do you strongly dislike? (This series of questions moves participants to a point where they feel more comfortable expressing criticism. It also moves from general to more specific issues.)

Notes

Process for Developing the Questions for your Focus Group

Now that you understand the types of questions that are ideal for focus groups and tips for sequencing the questions, it is time to create the questions for your focus group. Following is a process to follow for developing a question route:

Brainstorm questions.

When brainstorming questions, revisit the purpose statement and generate a list of questions that relate to the purpose. Do not critique or judge the questions in the brainstorming process. Quantity, not quality, is the primary goal

EXAMPLE: QUESTION BRAINSTORM

Focus Groups Focus Statement:
To find out from community residents their perceptions and ideas about adult recreational programs

Brainstormed Questions

- What do you like about our adult recreational programs?
- Which of our adult recreational programs have you attended?
- What kind of adult recreational programs would you be interested in attending?
- What do you wish could be improved about our adult recreational program?
- What hobbies or leisure activities do you partake in?
- What kind of classes have you taken in the past?
- What are some of the things you look for when choosing an adult recreational program?
- What changes would you make to our adult recreational programs?
- How do you decide which adult recreational programs to participate in?

Prioritize, rewrite, and sequence questions.

Look at the purpose statement again, decide which questions do not apply and which are most important. Next review the list of participants to ensure that the selected participants can relate and respond to the proposed questions. Since the group should meet for no more than two hours, there should be no more than five to seven clear, important questions addressed to the panel. This allows for adequate response and discussion time. Edit questions as necessary. Finally, arrange the questions in a sequence that will be comfortable for the participants, moving from 1) general to specific, 2) easy to challenging, and 3) positive to negative.

Estimate the time for questions

Test the questions and get feedback from others

The proposed questions should be tested before they are used in an actual focus group session. Distribute the questions to other staff members to see if their

Notes

responses coincide with the purpose statement. If the questions generate the desired responses and information, use them. If not, revise them.

STEP 5 – DEVELOP A SCRIPT

Although experienced facilitators may feel as though a script is unnecessary, a written script has several advantages:

- It helps to organize ideas and put the questions into context for the participants
- It ensures each focus group is conducted in a similar fashion, making the results more reliable
- It helps the facilitator stay on track and on time.

The scriptwriter needs to carefully craft the time so that the participants stay engaged, making sure that each section lasts no more than twenty minutes, which is the average attention span of an adult. There are three parts of a script, the opening, questions, and the closing.

Opening
The first few moments in a focus group discussion are critical. The opening is a time for the facilitator to welcome the group, introduce the purpose and context of the focus group, explain what a focus group is and how it will flow, and initiates introductions.

The following is an example of a typical introduction:

> Good afternoon and welcome, Thanks for taking the time to join our discussion of _______________. My name is _____________, and I represent ________________________. Assisting me is ______________, also from ___________________. We have been asked by ____________ to help them get some information about _______________________________________. They want the information to help them improve the service they provide.
>
> You were invited because you are all _______________________________. We want to tap into those experiences and your opinions about _____________.
>
> There are no right or wrong answers. We expect that you will have differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.
>
> We are tape recording (video taping, etc.) the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. No names will be included in any reports. Your comments are confidential. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.
>
> Don't feel like you have to respond to me all the time. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about these questions. I am here to ask questions, listen and make sure everyone has a chance to share. We're interested in hearing from each of you. So if you're talking a lot, I may ask you to give others a chance. We just want to make sure we hear from all of you.

Notes

> Feel free to get up and get more refreshments if you would like. Let's begin. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time.
>
> (Krueger, pp. 107-108)

Questions and Closing

The questions section is where all of the questions are presented and discussed. The first question is designed to get each person to talk, tells them what they have in common, and should be factual information regarding recent events.

Group discussions are unpredictable. A good facilitator will try to anticipate the various directions the discussions might take and how she will respond to each.

The closing section wraps up the group. The closing includes thanking the participants, providing them with an avenue for further input, explaining to them how the data will be used, and telling them when the larger process will be completed.

STEP 6 – SELECT A FACILITATOR

A good facilitator is an important part of a focus group. The facilitator should be someone with a working knowledge of group dynamics and a reputation as a good meeting leader. In particular, a focus group facilitator should be able to tactfully deal with outspoken group members, keep the discussion on track, and make sure every participant is heard from. Other responsibilities include:

- Setting a tone that makes participants feel comfortable and have fun
- Getting full answers by probing for more information
- Monitoring the time
- Heading off exchanges of opinion about individual items
- Ensuring that written comments can be understood by the person who interprets the results (if other than the facilitator)

The facilitator can be a staff member, volunteer, or member of a committee. However, if the budget permits a professional can be hired. To hire a professional focus group facilitator, contact the Office of Strategic Business Management at 305-375-5143 and ask for the individual who administers the survey pool (at the time of writing, that person is Christa Erml – 305-375-4494). A two-person team can also be used, where one person moderates the discussion and the other records it. Be wary of qualities of the facilitator(s) that may make participants uncomfortable. For example it is not recommended that the department director conduct a staff focus group evaluating the management.

STEP 7 – CHOOSE THE LOCATION

The setting of the focus group should also make the participants comfortable expressing their opinions. If possible, chose a location that is familiar to the participants. Some other factors to consider are:

- What message does the setting send? (Is it corporate, upscale, cozy, informal, sterile, inviting?)
- Does the setting encourage conversation?
- Can the location comfortably accommodate the amount of participants and allow them all to view each other?
- Is it easily accessible? (Consider access for people with disabilities, safety, transportation, parking, proximity, and convenience.)

CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP

Conducting the focus group is a matter of following the script, however there are a few more simple guidelines. To begin with, all of the materials and the facilitator should be in the room before the participants arrive. The materials needed are:

- Extra notepads and pencils/pens
- Flip chart, easel paper, or a chalk/dry erase board
- Markers
- List of participants with their phone numbers
- Focus group script
- Name tags
- Refreshments
- Clock
- Tape recorder

Seating needs to be arranged in such a way that all of the participants can see each other (i.e. U-shape, circle, or all at one table). As the participants arrive the facilitator should set a comfortable tone by greeting each one of the guests and engaging in some enjoyable discussion.

Once the group gets underway, the facilitator should ensure the following:

1. Set the tone.

A good facilitator fosters an atmosphere of comfort, enjoyment, and the open exchange of ideas. This can be achieved by offering refreshments, greeting the participants, introducing them to each other, and explaining to them that their comments will not be attributed to any specific individual (this will help them to speak freely). See the sample opening script on page 8 for an example of setting the tone at a focus group.

2. Make sure every participant is heard.

Ask people to respond to questions in a specific order, but also allow them to add more comments at the end. This way everyone will respond and will be able to say everything they want to say. Directly ask the more dominant participants to hold back so that the group may hear from other participants. Also, you may wish to instruct participants to work in pairs and report their findings.

3. Get full answers.

Since many people are not used to sharing their thoughts aloud in a group setting, they may offer brief responses. Therefore the facilitator must probe for more comprehensive responses to acquire the detailed information needed for analysis. In addition, try to get the participants to explain why they responded as they did.

4. **Monitor time closely.**

Participants attend focus groups voluntarily; do not waste their time. Stick to a set time schedule and make sure the session starts on time. If the session looks as though it may run long, ask the participants to write down any additional ideas they may have.

5. Keep the discussion on track.

If the discussion wanders on to a completely different topic, use these techniques to get back on track:

- State that the discussion seems to have wandered; then refocus the group to the topic at hand.
- Rephrase or reframe the strayed discussion in terms pertinent to the topic.
- Move on to the next question.
- If it is a particular person who seems to be taking the group off track, take a short break, take that person aside, and gently ask him or her to stick to the topic at hand.

6. Head off exchanges of opinion about individual items.

A focus group is not a forum for arguments or public speeches. Therefore facilitators need to let potential parties in conflict know that the purpose of the focus group is to consider everyone's opinion and gather information. Make it clear that there need not be a "winning" side and move on to the next questions if things start to become too confrontational. Agree to disagree.

Moderating Skills

Facilitators of group discussions can utilize many techniques to move discussions forward. Two favorite techniques are called the 'pause' and the 'probe'. These techniques help draw additional information from group members. A short pause is used to gain additional points of view or agreement with the previously mentioned position.

Probe questions include the following:

- Would you explain further?
- Would you give me an example of what you mean?
- Would you say more?
- Tell us more.
- Say more.
- Is there anything else?
- Please describe what you mean.

After probing the information, the facilitator might ask others in the group "does anyone see it differently," or "are there other points of view?"

Facilitators should be mindful that they are not speaking too much, moving too quickly through the focus group if there are few initial responses to the questions,

Notes

nodding in agreement with participants, or responding to comments that imply judgments about the quality of the comment.

INTERPRETING AND REPORTING THE RESULTS

STEP 1 – SUMMARIZE EACH SESSION

After each session the facilitator should review what was discussed by listening to the tape/video recorded session or with another person who observed the session to make sure that the facilitator's impressions are accurate. Then transcribe the notes that were taken and write a summary of each individual session. Quickly transcribing session observations helps avoid memory lapses; therefore, it is important that the facilitator (or whoever was recording the session) has enough time between sessions to transcribe their notes.

Summaries have two important functions: they are used for data analysis and can be sent to participants as a tangible product. Providing participants a summary of their session will make them feel more engaged in the process and confirm the facilitator's observations.

STEP 2 – ANALYZE THE SUMMARIES

Once completed, session summaries should all be read in one sitting. Review summaries for trends and surprises among participants keeping in mind that context and tone are equally important to the reiteration of particular statements. If a particular comment triggered an emotional response or multiple other comments make sure to note it in the analysis.

STEP 3 – WRITE THE REPORT

The report should include the background and purpose of the focus group in addition to the details of the sessions. The number and dates of sessions, as well as the name of the facilitator need to be noted as well. Be sure not to attribute statements to particular individuals or reveal any names of participants in the report. Furthermore, try to include accurate quotes that represent a diversity of comments in addition to typical comments. A copy of the focus group questions should be included as an appendix.

STEP 4 – TRANSLATE THE RESULTS INTO ACTION

Schedule a department meeting to review the report and discuss its' implications and be sure to refer back to the purpose statement. When analyzing the answers or insights the focus group provided compare, contrast, and combine information from the focus group with other sources (i.e. surveys, interviews, or secondary sources) to optimum understanding. Also, it is especially important to highlight main themes, problems and questions that arose during the sessions and discuss how these issues will be addressed. If there is a lot of information, group it and decide which items should become priorities. Finally, determine actions needed to correct deficiencies or issues identified.

APPENDIX A

Focus Group Telephone Script

Name of Person: ____

Phone Number: ____

Time Called: ____

Call Notes: ____

Hi, this is (YOUR NAME) and I'm with (AGENCY). We're working with (SPONSORING AGENCY) to (PURPOSE DESCRIPTION). Please note that this is not a sales call nor are we trying to convince you to take a specific action. I got your name from (NAME OF CONTACT), and they said you might be interested in what we are doing. We want to talk to people who (ATTRIBUTE) in a focus group to learn what we can do to improve. Your input and participation are vital, and will be developed into recommendations that will be submitted to (PERSON OF AUTHORITY).

The focus groups will consist of about 8 people, last about 1 ½ hours, and have refreshments served. We will also have (OTHER INCENTIVE) for you as a thank you for giving us your time and ideas.

Would you be willing to participate in a focus group at (LOCATION) on (DATE) to discuss the (TOPIC)?

No: ___

Thank you for your time. Please feel to contact us at (NUMBER) if you have any question or would like to attend the meeting.

Yes: ___

Great. May I have your mailing address? We would like to send you a written invitation confirming the location, date, and time.

Name: ____

Street Address: ____

City/State/Zip: ____

Thanks again. I'll send out a confirmation letter containing all necessary information and we look forward to seeing you at the discussion.

APPENDIX B

Follow-up Recruitment Letter

Name

Address

Dear Name:

Thank you for accepting our invitation to talk about (PURPOSE). We want advice about what you would like, what will work, and what won't work. This information will help (SPONSORING AGENCY) improve customer satisfaction- a goal that is one of our top priorities.

The group will be held:

DAY OF WEEK, DATE

TIME

ADDRESS AND DIRECTIONS

Refreshments and a thank you gift will be provided. If for some reason you won't be able to join us, please call as soon as possible so we can invite someone else. If you have any questions, please call me at (NUMBER)

We look forward to meeting you on (DATE).

Sincerely,

NAME

TITLE

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Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Simon, J.S. (1999). *The Wilder nonprofit field guide to conducting successful focus groups*. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In addition to the included Bibliography, below are some additional resource materials regarding focus groups.

Goldman, A.E., & McDonald, S.S. (1987). The group depth interview, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Greenbaum, T.L. (1998). The handbook for focus group research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.